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The monthly summary of consultation matters by Consultation GuRU –

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Consultation Catch-up



Reversing Wes Streeting's mistaken decision to abolish HEALTHWATCH in England should just be a start. Yvette Cooper has already committed to '*strengthening*' the independent voice that was recently threatened, but it is still a mystery how in fact this will be done. Given that devolution to strategic local authorities is the direction of travel, we can expect a major role for Mayors and new larger Councils. But the NHS itself has to be more willing to take patient and public voices more seriously. Neighbourhood Health needs to accompanied by re-vitalised Patient Participation Groups (PPGs) so that local issues can be raised more consistently with GPs and other health providers.

Best of the Blogs

Do we REALLY want a '*Minister for Not Listening*'? (Blog No 140)



Repealing hundreds of statutory duties to consult is going to be a minefield! It could mean taking away from charities, trade unions, trade associations, and all kinds of '*communities of interests*', their rights to a fair process for influencing public policy-making. Other aspects of the Government retreat from consultation are quite sensible, though they probably will not give Ministers the time and cost savings they want. But culling consultation obligations from decades of legislation will be a thankless task. So, who will be the unfortunate Minister sent to the Commons to persuade MPs to abandon consultations cherished by so many stakeholder groups? How long would it take before he or she becomes known as the 'Minister for not Listening!'? **Not sure this is good idea!**

Lessons from the reprieve of HEALTHWATCH (Blog No 141)



Flashback – 16 months ago to the day, on June 28th, 2025, Wes Streeting announced the abolition of HEALTHWATCH – mostly local bodies representing the voices of patients and the public. Now, a more thoughtful Secretary of State has agreed to retain and strengthen them. As a source of local engagement and consultation – they need significant improvement and both local authorities and the NHS need to take them more seriously. In the meantime, there are critical lessons to be learnt. Here are some of them.

Consultation – less about process! More an attitude of mind! (Blog 143)



Have we become too obsessed with the *process* of consultation – and neglected the underlying principles? This is a more reflective Blog – something to bear in mind as Ministers and officials figure out how to reform Government consultations without destroying their own listening credentials.

On PAGE 2 this month …

…More evidence of AI bots in a consultation, and two important studies on Climate Assemblies and how 'Mini-publics' relate to the 'Maxi-Public' The book review is Margaret Hodge's political autobiography – *'Battle Axe'*!

Instant insights

- **The impact of AI** on public consultation may be a hot topic right now, but it has recently emerged that back in 2023, 76% of responses to Rishi Sunak's consultation on creating a smoke-free generation were fraudulent. Experts from Edinburgh University analysed the exercise and published their conclusions in the journal *Tobacco Control*. Although it seems that the DHSC successfully identified and discounted these responses using bot detection methods, this appears to be the first documented instance of large-scale automated interference in a formal public health policy consultation. The scale and directional consistency of bot responses suggested an orgaanised campaign, consistent with prior evidence of tobacco industry efforts to manipulate public consultations through mass coordinated submission. Will this become a common occurrance as democratic governments seek to challenge international vested interests?

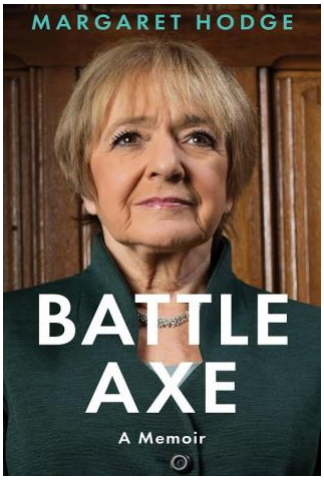
Straws in the wind

- Two new academic studies on **Citizens Assemblies** provide interesting insights into these important innovations in the field of public engagement and consultation. One, by German researcher, Janosch Pfeffer and others is titled *"Citizens' assemblies propose ambitious climate policy but impacts remain limited"* His team analysed 488 recommendations from six climate assemblies in Austria, Berlin, France, Germany, Scotland and the UK. They then compared each recommendation with existing government policy and considered whether the policy decision would have happened anyway - without the assembly?
  They concluded:
  - Citizens were consistently more ambitious than their governments. Most recommendations went beyond existing policy.
  - Real policy impact was rare. In France, about one in three recommendations shaped policy decisions. Elsewhere impact was minimal.
  - Where assemblies DID make a difference, they enriched existing plans, added momentum, brought in new ideas or helped break political deadlocks.
  - What set France apart was strong political leadership, real delegation of power to the assembly and the public pressure that followed. Good design alone did not seem to be enough.

  Some of its more detailed findings are rather more interesting, and I recommend this short but dense paper to anyone seriously attempting to secure significant impacts for their Assemblies.

- The other, from the University of Exeter is about *The Politicisation of Deliberative Mini-Publics* looks at a wider range of deliberative processes and looks at the benefits and risks of their **'politicisation'**. The paper is an excellent review of the literature and notes how many practitioners want to insulate such processes from contamination from normal politics. But this can undermine their legitimacy and limit their effectiveness. The authors therefore explore how to involve politicians, political parties and wider civic society at various points in the process – whilst planning mini-publics, during the events and afterwards. It is all about the relationship between 'Mini-publics' and the wider 'Maxi-publics' Of course, I have my own preferred solution. Take the findings of a Citizens Assembly and subject them to a formal consultation!
  Standby for a Blog on this important issue soon!

The Reading List



This memoir traces the successive battles of a long-time political and Parliamentary warrior. Little in this book is quite as thought-provoking as the account of her Jewish family background and the trials and tragedies of her early life. But over the years, Margaret Hodge became a noted campaigner as she moved from leader of Islington Council at the height of Labour's 'loony left' spasm through her arrival in the Commons when it finally became more female-friendly and to Ministerial office where she pioneered '*Sure Start'*. Her later roles as a feisty Chair of the Public Accounts Committee and a persistent opponent of Jeremy Corbyn and the antisemitism tendency raised her public profile but her most recent passion is tackling international money-laundering and cross-border corruption. There is much to admire – including fascinating reflections on widowhood and the scope for older women to contribute to public life. Ultimately, however, this is a book for those interested in the machinery of democracy, the power of motivated individuals to make a difference and how challenging it can be!

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